FEIGHTNER

Lt. E.L. "Whitey" Feightner in the cockpit of a VF-8 Hellcat. As an ensign, Feightner flew with VF-10, in the Guadalcanal Campaign. He gained four kills, and five more with VF-8. He retired as a Rear Admiral.

R.G. Smith

Grumman F4F Wildcat

RAdm. E.L. "Whitey" Feightner won his wings in 1942 and arrived at VF-10 in time to make the new squadron's first cruise in USS *Enterprise* (CV-6). He participated in the Battle of Santa Cruz in October 1942, and fought as a member of the Cactus Air Force on Guadalcanal. During his combat tours with VF-10, and later VF-8 in USS *Bunker Hill* (CV-17), Lt. Feightner shot down nine Japanese aircraft, and was awarded three DFCs.

After the war, he was an early member of the Blue Angels as well as a jet test pilot, participating in many areas of development including aerial refueling and carrier qualifications. He commanded VF-11, and served as CAG for Air Group 10 and Air Group 4.

As a flag officer he served a tour as Assistant Commander for Logistics and Fleet Support, and a subsequent tour as Deputy Director for Plans and Programs in NAVAIRSYSCOM.

Approach: *During World War II, safety was mostly a convenience of the moment, with no formal programs like today's NATOPS. Can you tell us a little about how, as a young fighter pilot in combat, you thought about safety? Did it enter your daily routine?*

RAdm. Feightner: We carried spare aircraft on the ship. There was never time to completely ready them for flight. A couple of planes' guns froze up in the air because we didn't have time to clean out the Cosmoline preservative, a very thick grease that, as soon as you got airborne, congealed and froze. I remember being jumped by Zeros. My flight lead's guns froze up and he couldn't get off even one round. After that we were very conscious

about the grease on the guns. Properly working guns were a definite safety concern for a squadron.

We were also concerned about barricade crashes and catching a "late wire" since you could hit your head on the gunsight. We had 11 arresting wires on the ships in those days, and from about the 8-wire on, if the pilot wasn't ready for it, you stopped so suddenly that you were thrown forward and bashed your head on the gunsight. I have a scar over my left eye because I hit the sight once after catching the 9-wire. That was a pretty sudden stop. I broke the glass in my goggles.

Our skipper, LCdr. Jimmy Flatley,[1] came up with the idea of chest straps secured directly to the seat and coming around our chests. That was really the forerunner of the shoulder harness. As far as I know, we were the only outfit to use such an arrangement.

We had another concern: during an arrested landing, one of our planes' guns fired. We changed our procedures after that. If you had fired your guns while airborne, you pointed your aircraft away from your formation with the gun switches off, and pulled the trigger to make sure that the guns would not fire again. We had a lot of shorts in the wiring at that time. Once the guns were charged it was important to make sure they were cleared prior to landing.

Approach: *What were some of the concerns you had during the Battle of Santa Cruz and afterward, when the Navy shuttled its fighters and bombers from the carrier to the Marine field on Guadalcanal?*

RAdm. Feightner: One problem we worried about then concerned flying from Enterprise to Henderson Field on Guadalcanal: we had lots of groundloops. The brakes were not adequately maintained aboard ship. The Wildcat was a bit top heavy, and if there was a crosswind, it was easy to groundloop. In fact, the Marines used to make fun of us because we'd often put two or three aircraft in the palm trees.

I have a distinct memory of Swede Vejtasa putting his prop completely through a palm tree. It really was a

[1] Capt. – later RAdm. – James Flatley commanded the U.S. Naval Aviation Safety Activity in 1953. The Safety Activity was renamed the U.S. Naval Aviation Safety Center in 1957, and the Naval Safety Center in 1968.

Ens. Feightner in Hawaii – May 43

problem, especially since we did not always have a warning that we were going ashore. (Lt. – later-Capt. – Vejtasa won the Navy Cross during Santa Cruz for shooting down seven Japanese bombers in one day. – Ed.)

Approach: *Did they ignore servicing the brakes aboard ship?*

RAdm. Feightner: Well, remember, when we caught a wire on the ship, then taxied forward, into the wind, we didn't need the brakes that much. There were also many deck crewmen who manhandled your aircraft around. The brakes just did not get the attention they perhaps should have.

Approach: *Wasn't the field at Henderson pretty rough, anyway?*

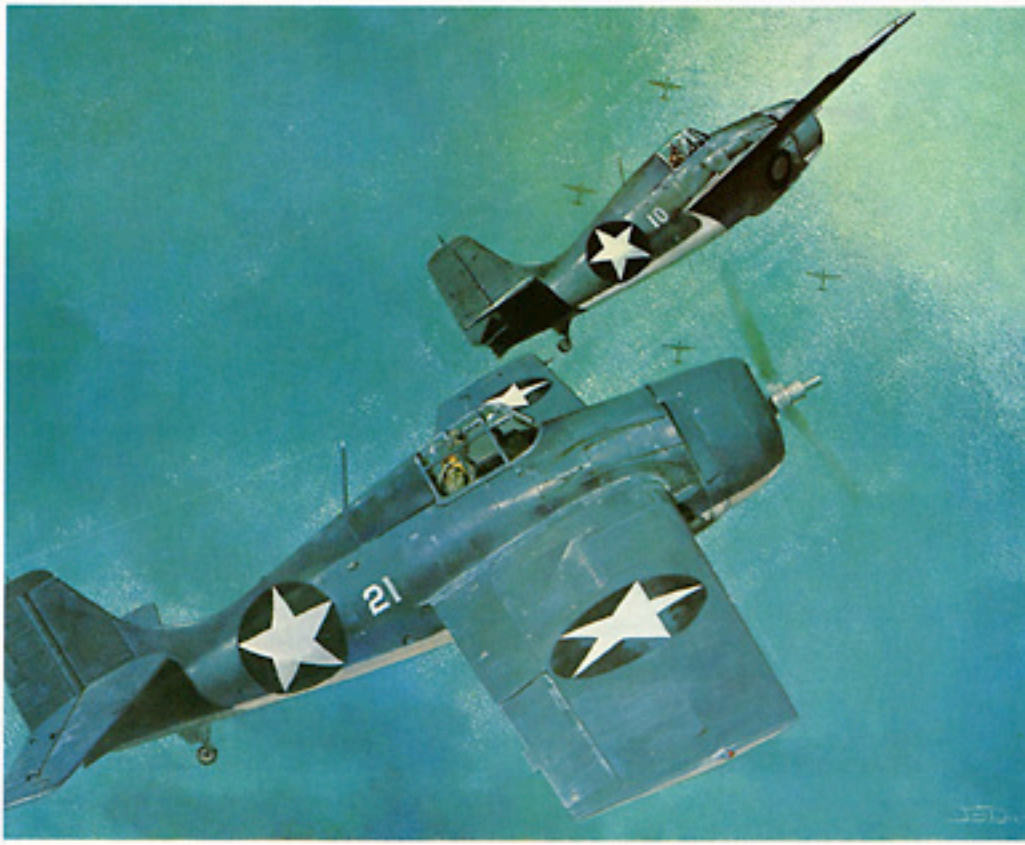
RAdm. Feightner: It was terrible, Marston matting with crushed coral spread over the top. Sometimes we landed on grass fields and even on the beach, on the sand.

Approach: *For the two months, October-November 1942, you were really just trying to stay alive and did not consider safety. Would you say, then, that in an all-out war that safety is a casualty?*

RAdm. Feightner: No, not particularly. We concentrated on other aspects of safety. For instance, knowing we had a good chance of getting shot down, we paid a lot more attention to our parachutes, and to whether our plane's canopy would open so we could get out.

We were also concerned about what to do in case of a fire in flight. It was something we lived with constantly, something which was very likely to happen; we were shot up lots of times.

James B. Deneen, courtesy Aeroprint



Guadalcanal F4F Wildcats peel off on a Japanese formation

We were very conscious of emergency procedures, probably more so than when we were not in combat.

Approach: *Could you apply your experiences to today's crews? Knowing procedures would be a priority, wouldn't it?*

RAdm. Feightner: Oh, absolutely. The real emergency procedures that you concentrate on the minute you enter combat, these things come to the fore. Such things as navigation become means of survival.

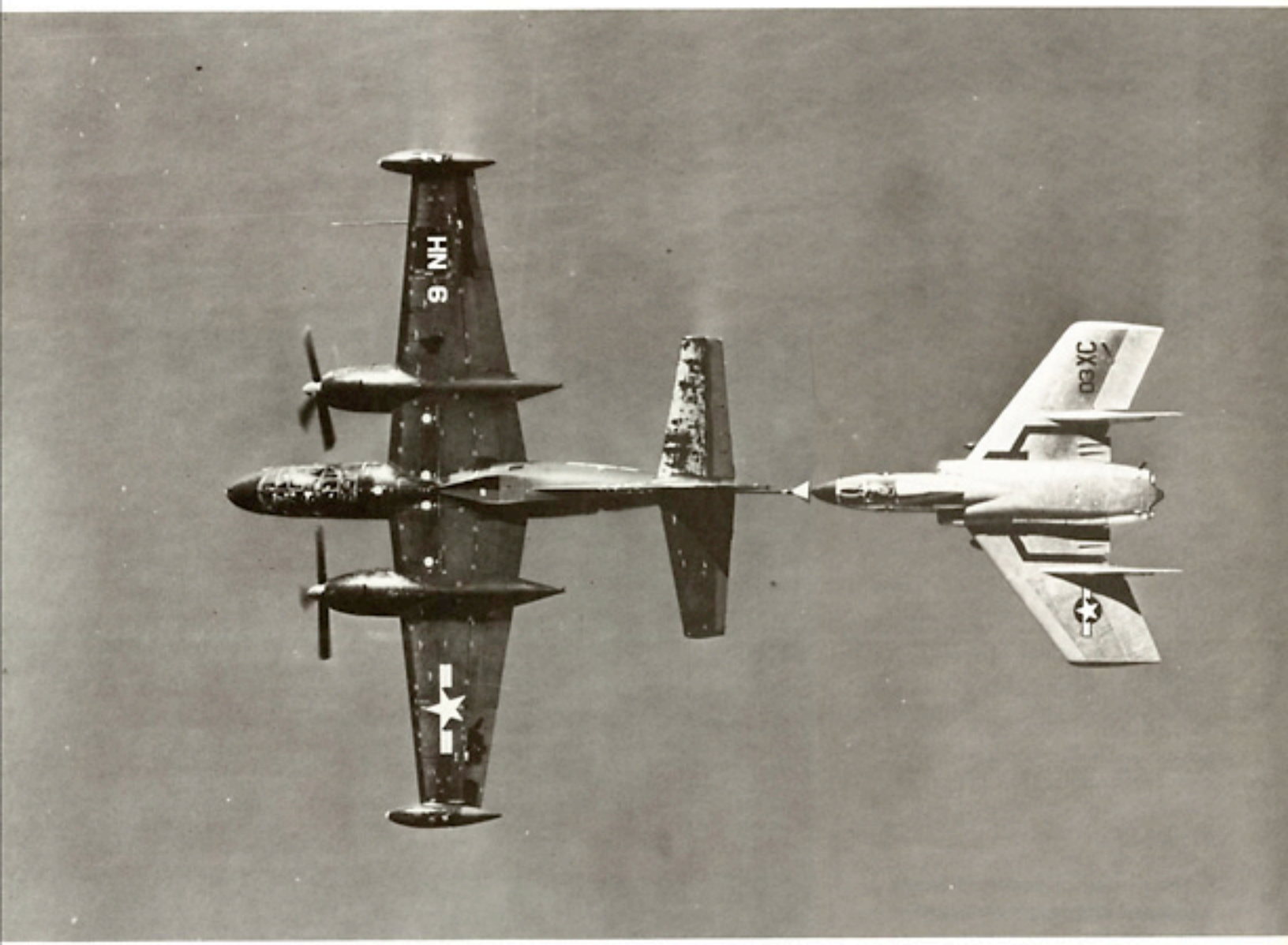
The YZ/YG direction and homing beacon we used to return to the ship was very reliable, but the ship sometimes turned the beacon off to confuse the enemy. We operated in absolute radio silence most of the time. There was no chatter on the air. We did it all by hand signals.

Approach: *Today's crews are also concerned about operating in EMCON, and sometimes getting into trouble.*

RAdm. Feightner: You can get into trouble if you don't have a set procedure. As a CAG, I went through a lot of exercises in EMCON. Sometimes, we sealed the radio with tape. It could only be used in an emergency, and if you broke the seal, you were eliminated from the exercise.

Approach: *After the war, you worked on the first tests of the angled flight deck, along with RAdm. Alan Shepard. What were a few of your experiences?*

RAdm. Feightner: The angled deck was, of course, a new concept and we were concerned about crosswind, but we discovered it wasn't a problem. At first, it was difficult because we were all used to flying the approach and chopping the power as we got the cut. It got to be a little hairy. I remember Bud Sickel going over the angle in his XFJ-2, which was really nothing more than a navalized F-86. He dribbled off the end but he kept it in the air. There was 75 feet to play with before he would have hit the water.



An F7U Cutlass refueling from an AJ tanker

I took both the F7U Cutlass and F3D Skyknight aboard. I made a lot of landings on the early angled deck in the F3D. The Cutlass was actually the easiest plane to bring aboard, other than the fact that you couldn't see directly forward on final. But in the F7U-3, we could raise or rotate the seat forward. I did a lot of work with special cockpit indicators where I could adjust the speed one knot at a time in, for instance, a high-drag configuration where I worked strictly with power to overcome whatever drag was present.

Approach: *You flew with the Blue Angels in 1952. Please describe a few of your experiences.*

RAdm. Feightner: I was actually assigned to the first team in 1946, but my orders were changed before we ever put on a show, and I was reassigned as an aide for CARDIV 3. During the war, the team formed the nucleus of VF-191 aboard Princeton, and the leader, Johnny Magda, was killed. After the war, I was asked to reform the team around the F7U Cutlass, but that was not practical. We couldn't fly the Cutlass in formation, because the hydraulic controls system was unreliable. The Navy had already made the announcement that the team would use F7Us, and we had to do it, at least for the two solos.

Vought painted a couple of F7Us in the Blue Angels colors, and we picked them up at the plant and flew them to Corpus Christi, where the team was based at that time. But we could not find any other experienced Cutlass pilots. About that time, we got F9F-5 Panthers, but they were soon grounded, so I took one of the F7Us, and got a previous member, Lt. H.C. "Mac" MacKnight, ordered back to the team. He and I flew the F7Us, while the rest of the team flew TVs, the Navy's version of the T-33. They gave people rides and put on little shows.

You flew the Cutlass on the hydraulic system until you had a problem, which you often did. It took 11 seconds before you had mechanical control, and that brought up some very interesting incidents. You were totally out of control. (I have more "passenger" time in single-place aircraft than any other pilot...I've lost the control system 75 to 100 times. It was a regular occurrence.) With the Cutlass, you had to bleed off pressure before an interlock would activate and springs snapped into place; it took 11 very long seconds.

Approach: *That could be a problem, especially at low altitude.*

RAdm. Feightner: Very true. It happened on takeoff at Pensacola. We had SECNAV guests waiting to go out on a carrier. I put on a show in the F7U, and as I lifted off in burner, I pulled the nose up and lost the hydraulic control system. I was strictly a passenger as the plane went straight up in the air to 1,500-1,700 feet, stalled, and headed toward the ground. I sat there with no control, and the stick in my lap. Fortunately, everything connected back up mechanically in time for me to make a square turn at the bottom. There's some question as to whether I actually touched the ground. The plane was flying toward a row of trees that I couldn't get over, so I just cut a hole through them.

Approach: *You obviously didn't think about ejecting.*

RAdm. Feightner: I couldn't, not at that altitude, and with only one engine because you did not have enough hydraulic power to jettison the canopy; you would rob the control system. At that time, there was also some concern over whether you'd lose your feet when you ejected.

Approach: *Did you have any special safety considerations during the Blue Angels' early days?*

RAdm. Feightner: When we got jets, we decided that at low altitude, 400-500 feet, we did not have time to eject, and we told people to open, unsnap the seat belt before they ejected. At low altitude, things happen fast, and we didn't have an automatic seat belt.

Approach: *Wouldn't you have had a seat slap?*

RAdm. Feightner: Probably. When we had a four-plane midair in July 1952, one day before I left the team, only the tail-end Charlie's pilot ejected, but his chute didn't open. He was still sitting upright in the seat with his belt connected when we found him. He would have made it if he had loosened his belt.

In the Panthers, we also disconnected the red, fire-warning lights because they would falsely illuminate, especially while we were in a loop. That could be dangerous, flying that close together. We depended on someone else in the formation telling us there was a fire. It was too much of a distraction in the middle of a maneuver at that low an altitude.

Approach: *In the February 1988 issue, we ran a story about "Escort Etiquette." As a CARGRU ops officer during the Enterprise's (CVAN-65) 1963 round-the-world cruise, under RAdm. Bill Martin, how did you handle overflights?*

RAdm. Feightner: We always intercepted the Russians with two aircraft, one in trail, while the other flew alongside. We used hand signals to direct them away from the ship. If they kept coming, we'd fire our guns. And, if they still kept coming – or if they opened their bomb-bays – we could shoot them down, although, fortunately, things never went that far. We never knew what they were going to do, and didn't want to take any chances. During our 1963 round-the-world cruise, we had a lot of planes try to overfly the task force, but we never had one get closer than 75 miles.

Approach: *As a flag officer, you were in on the ground floor of the F-14's design, including the controversy surrounding a gun for the new fighter. Please describe the discussion and the compromises that were finally decided.*

RAdm. Feightner: When the F-14 was first designed, it did not have a gun. The pilots objected, and since I was a design officer at that time, I decided to make a real plea for a gun. After several tries, VAdm. Tom Connolly, the DCNO (Air), pointed out that the gun and ammunition would weigh 5,000 pounds.

I said, "Admiral, why is it, when every fighter pilot wants a gun, we can't have one?"

After much discussion, he relented and we compromised. If the F-14 was used as a fighter, without the Phoenix, we would carry a gun. As an air superiority fighter, the F-14 would carry two Sparrows, two Sidewinders, and a full load of 20mm ammunition. If the plane flew in its fleet defense role with Phoenix, we had to acknowledge that it was in an overload condition. We designed the gun so that it would not affect the weight and balance of the aircraft regardless of the weapons loadout. Grumman did a good job with the design.

– Peter Mersky